

Transition Document to the Obama Administration

A stylized, glowing American flag graphic with stars and stripes, serving as a background for the title text.

TURNING PRIORITIES INTO ACTION:
HOW THE SOCIAL WORK
PROFESSION WILL HELP

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Social Work Leadership in Times of Historic Change	2
Reviving the Economy	4
Fixing our Health Care System	6
Improving our Education System	8
Fixing our Social Security System	8
Ending the War in Iraq and Finishing our Mission in Afghanistan	9
International Peacebuilding and Community Development	10
Utilizing Social Workers to Build Communities.....	11
Equality for All	11
Conclusion	12
Notes	13
References and Resources	13



SOCIAL WORK LEADERSHIP IN TIMES OF HISTORIC CHANGE

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”

—Jane Addams
Founder of Social Work

The United States is facing complex and converging challenges from wars abroad and a struggling economy to rising food prices and untenable mortgages. The nation has emerged as a country unable to keep pace with economic and social demands. This presents an extraordinary opportunity for the incoming Administration, as well as Congress, to chart a new course for our nation. We must rebuild healthy communities, strengthen families, and work with individuals to reach their full potential. This will be possible with the assistance of the over 600,000 professional social workers in the United States. Social workers have consistently been the frontline workers in times of crisis and have always provided a social safety net to ensure that everyone, particularly the vulnerable in our society, has access to needed services and resources.

During times of great distress and of momentous change, social workers have helped to change the face of the nation. During the Great Depression, social workers played an integral role in the relief and security of individuals, families, and communities in the United States. Leo Wolman noted in the *Yale Review*, Winter 1933,

Bad as these conditions are, and far-reaching as their social implications have become, they would have been incomparably worse but for the skill and unselfishness with which the social

workers of this country have performed the task of organizing the machinery of unemployment relief...they have gone about their business quietly and effectively and, to a greater extent than any other group, have contributed to the preservation of standards and decency in the administration of relief.

Harry Hopkins, a prominent social worker and president of the American Association of Social Workers in 1923, played a critical role in policy development during the Great Depression and served as a close advisor to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Additionally, social worker Frances Perkins was appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the position of Secretary of Labor, making her the first woman ever appointed to the United States Cabinet.

Many of the architects of the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty were social workers. Social worker Whitney M. Young, Jr. promoted a "Domestic Marshall Plan," and is widely recognized as the co-author of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty initiative. Social Worker Dr. Dorothy I. Height worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney M. Young, Jr. She continues her important work for children and families today.

These social workers embodied the primary mission of the profession to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

For each session of Congress, NASW crafts a detailed legislative agenda; however, we wanted to provide this initial overview of critical areas where social workers can assist you with accomplishing your stated agenda.

NASW's main legislative focus as the 111th Congress convenes will be the Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act, which provides a strong foundation to ensure that millions of clients across the country can continue to receive necessary services and care. Professional social workers have unique expertise that will enable them to help solve the social concerns and challenges outlined in this document and this legislation is critical to ensuring that they can continue this important work.

REVIVING THE ECONOMY

Enact pay equity for women

While women constitute 51% of the population of the United States, they experience continuing disparate treatment. There continues to be a gender gap in earnings between men and women. Household income varies dramatically and women and women-headed households are more likely to live in poverty. Violence against women is an ongoing challenge. Social work is a female-majority profession and women are the majority of clients served by the profession. These statements are not abstractions to us. We witness and address the consequences of this ongoing discrimination every day.

Enacting pay equity legislation will not only revive the economy; it will address discriminatory wage practices, which create long term effects for women and their families and systematically engender poverty. Wage discrimination means women earn less throughout their lifetimes and are more challenged during retirement. Children are affected when women cannot adequately provide financial resources for their families.

Reduce child poverty

The economy as it is currently structured makes it impossible to ensure material sufficiency for the total population, creating economic uncertainty and insecurity. Children especially suffer from the effects of poverty, which can impede cognitive ability and can contribute to poor physical and emotional health. The United States has the second worst poverty rate among 26 wealthy countries, and social workers struggle every day to find resources to alleviate poverty for children.

Enacting government supports for children similar to those available for the elderly can reduce child poverty, just as elderly poverty has been reduced.

Provide offender re-entry programs

Social workers are integrally involved with providing reentry services for many of the 650,000 offenders that are released from prisons and jails nationwide each year. Comprehensive reentry programming, including prerelease programs, drug rehabilitation, vocational training and work programs are necessary, so those having served their sentences can succeed and contribute to their communities. Addressing inequities in the justice system is also key to lowering incarceration rates.

Reform Immigration Policy

Social workers see the impact of immigrant and refugee policies in their everyday practice and we have a special interest in the effect of immigration policies on families and children. We support policies that ensure children do not grow up permanently disadvantaged by the immigration status of their parents. In keeping with this principle, immigrant families should not suffer the penalties of deportation for family-related stresses and violence except in the most extreme cases. We also advocate for commitment on the part of the U.S. government to end human rights violations worldwide and for reform in immigration and refugee policy to reaffirm the contributions of immigrants to this country.

FIXING OUR HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

Expand the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)

Health services play a crucial role in the lives of children, allowing children to grow and develop to their fullest potential. State Children’s Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP) have allowed states to provide insurance coverage to more children. We support expansion of this program and similar reforms as included in the bill passed by the 110th Congress and vetoed by President Bush.

Provide affordable, accessible and high-quality health care to all

Social workers are the largest providers of mental health services in the nation. Social workers are also a significant provider of services to clients in health care settings. According to one survey, thirteen percent of licensed social workers identify health as their primary focus, making it the third most common practice area in the profession.

NASW supports and has advocated for a national health care policy that ensures the rights of universal access to a continuum of physical and behavioral health services to promote wellness, maintain optimal health, prevent illness and disability, treat health conditions, ameliorate the effects of unavoidable incapacities, and provide supportive long-term and end-of-life care. The services must be available to all people in the United States, regardless of financial status, race, ethnicity, disability, religion, immigration status, age, gender, sexual orientation, or geographic location.

Address health inequities

An essential component of eradicating health inequities, is addressing the social determinants of health. Some even suggest that this will be the most important factor of health care reform. Social determinants include a person's socioeconomic status, neighborhood, employment conditions, access to health care, ethnicity, and personal behaviors.

Social workers have been leading the way in cultural competence and addressing racism. We have tools that can be widely used throughout the health and human services system to improve care and address inequities based upon ethnicity. Our *Code of Ethics*, in addition to espousing the importance of social justice and working to eliminate discrimination, also includes a specific provision on cultural competence. We have created and distributed standards for culturally competent practice, as well as indicators to measure the achievement of this competence. We published *Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action*. All of these documents are available to the public on our website to help us move towards greater health for everyone.

IMPROVING OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Provide increased services to address student's biopsychosocial needs

Increasingly, school personnel find that social, emotional and behavioral needs of children interfere with academic attainment. Providing additional services to address these needs lessens the barriers to educational achievement and should be an important segment of the plan to fix our educational system. Social workers work in school settings and help schools and communities address systemic issues such as school dropout rates, adolescent pregnancy, child abuse, homelessness, and juvenile crime, as well as, emotional and behavioral problems like substance abuse and suicide. When these issues are appropriately addressed, schools can expect increases in academic achievement, graduation rates, and students continuing on to post-secondary education. However, such services are often discretionary and caseloads are high. Programs as suggested in S. 3364 and H.R. 6654 of the 110th Congress, "Increased Student Achievement through Increased Student Support" provide a start.

FIXING OUR SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM

Preserve Social Security and expand income resources for retirees

The social work profession is a significant, experienced provider of frontline services to older adults and their families. Programs like Social Security and Medicare have significantly reduced poverty for people who are aging. Individuals, families and communities have come to rely upon the availability of these programs. The integrity and preservation of the Social Security system is essential, with special attention to the needs of older women.

ENDING THE WAR IN IRAQ AND FINISHING OUR MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN

Provide essential behavioral health services to active duty military and veterans

Since 1926, social workers have been providing services to people in the military, veterans and their families. Currently the Veterans' Administration (VA) is the largest employer of social workers in the nation, with over 6,000 workers. In addition, social workers provide services in the home communities of veterans. Recently NASW signed on to the "Give an Hour" program for licensed clinical social workers to provide up to one hour per week of free psychotherapy. Over one million men and women have been deployed in the latest military actions, including 350,000 women. Suicides among veterans are at 18 each day and eventually death by suicide outpaces death during combat. Veterans returning home after multiple deployments are also facing different challenges than previous veterans. Social workers understand that each person has a different reaction to military life and combat, coupled with the societal stigma of seeking behavioral health treatment. Families are also affected. Behavioral health services are critical to ensuring these veterans can continue living a full life.

INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Support international exchange

Throughout the 53 year history of NASW and the longer history of its predecessor organizations, international development has been key. From assisting with establishment of social work programs and education throughout the world, as well as exchanging effective methods of practice, social workers have been global citizens. Jane Addams, our founder, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. Through its Social Workers Across Nations (SWAN) program, NASW participates in a variety of capacity-building international work. As a member of the International Federation of Social Workers, we contribute to policy development and social work practice around the world. Numerous delegations of social workers visit our US offices, most recently from Korea, China, and Russia. A yearly exchange takes place in partnership with People to People Ambassadors program. Recent visits have included China, Cambodia and South Africa. In November we hosted a summit on Best Practices in Psychosocial Oncology with Hungary.

Social workers possess a wealth of knowledge about challenges facing people not only in the United States, but around the world. In addition, social workers in other countries have developed excellent strategies and programs to address similar challenges. Federal government support and partnership for increased exchanges can strengthen services in the United States, as well as increase the capacity for community development abroad.

UTILIZING SOCIAL WORKERS TO BUILD COMMUNITIES

Understanding communities is essential for effective social work practice. Our profession is centered on the person-in-environment model, a holistic view of understanding and assessing the individual, family or community in the context of their environment. Social workers use this perspective and these skills nationally, as well as globally, serving in the Peace Corps and the Department of State. We have an office at the United Nations. NASW is a non-governmental organization and collaborates with similar groups through organizations like InterAction. We would be pleased to partner with governmental organizations to recruit more social workers into these key positions to strengthen communities.

EQUALITY FOR ALL

The United States is a dynamic country increasingly at ease with its diversity. We repudiate marginalizing minorities and those who have attributes dissimilar from the mainstream. NASW has a broad-based commitment to social justice which incorporates diverse groups who historically or currently are oppressed, underserved and underrepresented. These groups include people of color, people with disabilities, people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, women, older people, as well as those who are disadvantaged because of life circumstances. As social workers, we believe that corrective action is essential to abate inequities associated with discriminatory practices. We assert, as a profession, that any intolerance is unacceptable and diminishes individual self-worth as well as exacerbates divisiveness. Increases in racially or religiously motivated hate crimes, crimes against women, and restrictions on people's right to privacy are infringements which impede progress. Civil rights initiatives, in our view, unify the nation and are for the common good. Adopting initiatives that reduce hate crimes; provide stronger mechanisms to document hate crimes; and address racial profiling are key in these efforts.

CONCLUSION

Professional social workers will play a significant role in addressing these social challenges. With a unique blend of education, experience, and expertise, professional social workers can help to mend our fractured society and rebuild healthy families and communities. However, the social work profession is at a critical juncture. With society's psychosocial needs rapidly rising and recruitment and retention decreasing in the profession, significant efforts must be taken to ensure an adequate social work workforce for the future. There is a moral imperative in our nation to take care of not only our at-risk and underserved populations, but to ensure that every person has the ability to live a healthy, productive life. Social work provides the answers to many of our most troubling societal questions and is the profession that has historically led efforts to promote public welfare. However, the profession is currently facing significant challenges including competing policy priorities, fiscal constraints, unprecedented educational debt, comparatively insufficient salaries, increased administrative burdens, and unsupportive work environments which have made it difficult to keep pace with increasing client demand.

The **Social Work Reinvestment Initiative** is a groundbreaking effort to recruit and retain professional social workers to ensure that millions of citizens can continue to receive social work services for years to come. Composed of 56 state and local plans as well as federal legislation geared towards ensuring a robust social work workforce, the reinvestment initiative is a comprehensive approach to solving the problems facing families and communities nationwide. The cornerstone of the initiative is the **Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act**, first introduced in the 110th Congress. When enacted, this critical legislation will establish a Social Work Reinvestment Commission to provide a comprehensive analysis of current trends within the academic and professional social work communities. Specifically, the Commission will develop long-term recommendations and strategies to maximize the ability of America's social workers to serve their clients with expertise and care.

NOTES

The quote from Leo Wolman's *Unemployment Relief* article in the *YALE REVIEW*, Winter 1933, was taken from the article, *Social Workers and Relief* in the February 1933 edition of *The Compass*, newsletter of the American Association of Social Workers.

REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

Assuring the Sufficiency of a Frontline Workforce: A National Study of Licensed Social Workers
http://workforce.socialworkers.org/studies/nasw_06_execsummary.pdf

Indicators for the Achievement of NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice
www.socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWCulturalStandardsIndicators2006.pdf

Institutional Racism & the Social Work Profession: A Call to Action
www.socialworkers.org/diversity/InstitutionalRacism.pdf

NASW Code of Ethics www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp

NASW Consumer Web site www.helpstartshere.org

NASW Web site www.socialworkers.org

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is the world's largest membership organization of professional social workers, with chapters in each state and U.S. territory and members in every congressional district. NASW promotes federal legislation and policies that support effective social work practice, enhance the lives of the individuals, groups, and communities we serve, and promote fairness and well-being. We remain concerned about a broad range of issues that affect the quality of life for people in the United States, and recognize that professional social workers have the necessary education, training, and experience to help solve many of the current social challenges we are facing nationally and globally.



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